

The Empathy Connection

Creating Caring

Communities

through the

Human-Animal

Relationship



DORIS DAY ANIMAL FOUNDATION

The Doris Day Animal Foundation (DDAF) is a national nonprofit organization working to create caring communities. Thanks to a generous grant from the Claire Giannini Fund, we are pleased to present “The Empathy Connection,” a publication designed to help parents, teachers, and other adults instill the important skill of empathy in our youth.

As a mother of two school-age children, president of the parent teacher’s association of a middle school, and as the Executive Director of the Doris Day Animal Foundation, I know how important empathy is in children’s development. Empathy is an important skill, related to success in many areas of development—social, academic, and personal. Learning how to respond empathetically is also the best antidote to violence, bullying, and other unwanted, aggressive behavior in children.

The basic tenet of DDAF’s “creating caring communities” mission is that the protection of, and respect for, animals is closely linked to human welfare. The development of empathy is a case in point: one of the best—and probably one of the most enjoyable—ways to teach children empathy is through the human-animal relationship.

The Doris Day Animal Foundation offers training workshops and materials designed to help professional and lay communities address the problem of violence and promote positive development in children, families, and communities. We do this by demonstrating how paying attention to the animal-human welfare link builds safer, more creative communities for all living creatures.

We hope you will let us know how you used “The Empathy Connection,” or other DDAF materials. Also, please contact us if you would like information about the Doris Day Animal Foundation, or if you have any questions or suggestions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly Hazard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Holly E. Hazard
Executive Director

The Empathy Connection

Beginning at birth, we surround children with animal presences.

Their clothing is decorated with animals. Stuffed animals are cuddled, named, and become trusted confidants. Plastic animals accompany them in their baths. Most children learn their numbers by counting animals and learn to read from pages filled with pictures of animals. Of course, real animals also fill their lives: companions at home, creatures encountered in nature, and those introduced to them in school and in the media.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide teachers and parents with information on the importance of empathy to children's success at school and in their social and personal lives.

We will also illustrate the valuable role that animals play in the development of empathy. We will offer practical ideas for helping children learn this important skill through their everyday contact with animals.

Once we become alert to the various ways in which the lives of animals intersect with ours, we can take advantage of this relationship to provide children with the opportunity to grow empathetically. "The Empathy Connection" first answers basic questions: What is empathy? Why is empathy important? What does empathy have to do with how we treat animals? After establishing this understanding, we will present both general and specific "empathy building tips."

What is empathy?

Empathy is both a cognitive and an emotional skill. The term empathy can be used in two ways. It can mean a "thinking" response, or the ability to think about and describe how another being feels. For example, Jane recognizes that her friend Susan is anxious about talking in front of the class. She thinks to herself, "Susan's face is getting red and she is fidgeting in her seat. I think she's afraid that the teacher will call on her." Empathy also can refer to the ability to "feel"—to experience another person or animal's feelings and circumstances. In seeing her friend become uncomfortable, Susan herself can experience some of the anxious feelings her friend is experiencing. Susan also feels a mild discomfort as she "tunes into" her friend's emotions.



When a child expresses empathy, she shows self-awareness, the ability to manage emotions and delay gratification.

Why is empathy important?

In addition to the familiar cognitive intelligence measured by standard Intelligence Quotient tests, educators and psychologists now recognize the importance of other types of intelligence—emotional, social, and moral. All these intelligences play an important role in guiding a child toward a productive and satisfying life—one in which she or he can be a valuable member of society. Adults also benefit from empathy training. One study found that adults who were given empathy training expressed greater job satisfaction and were better at teamwork.¹ And empathy is not only about feeling; it is also about acting. Young people trained to feel empathy for a group of needy people also were more likely to help the needy by approving money for a program that would assist them.²

Some educators may question the extent to which it is a school's job to develop kindness, generosity, compassion, and helpfulness in their students. Even educators who believe in staying focused on “the three Rs,” however, will be interested to learn that the latest research shows that successful learners are knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic, and empathetic.³

A child who is a successful learner possesses a number of important qualities. She is knowledgeable and creative. She has the ability to acquire, evaluate, and apply her knowledge. She is also motivated to learn and has confidence in herself as a learner. And the successful learner demonstrates “. . . insight into the motives, feelings, and behavior of others and the ability to communicate this understanding—in a word, empathy.”⁴ Successful students are successful in school, at home, and in the community. They know how to communicate with others. They are both able to look at themselves through the eyes of another and put themselves in another's place.

We know a lot more today than we did thirty years ago about the importance of developing empathy in youth. We have learned that helping children develop empathy is good for them, and good for communities.

- Empathy is an important emotional resource linked to many positive psychological traits. Children who are empathetic also tend to be more resilient; they are better able to handle stress and “bounce back” from difficulties.⁵ Resilient individuals also are more confident and are able to make use of social support and find coping strategies when needed.⁶
- Empathetic children also are more socially competent⁷ and more popular with their peers.⁸



Successful students are successful in school, at home, and in the community.

- Previously psychologists believed people perceived someone as a leader because they could perform complex tasks. Now we know that the perception of someone as a leader is also influenced by his or her emotional skills.⁹
- Empathetic children are less likely to be overly aggressive.¹⁰
- Researchers have found correlations between empathy and cognitive skills, such as spatial ability. One study found that empathetic people were better able to give directions to a stranger.¹¹
- When a child expresses empathy, he shows self-awareness, the ability to manage emotions and delay gratification.¹²

A twelve-year old boy who decides to walk his dog and miss the first part of his favorite television show displays both attributes. He understands that his dog, who has been alone in the house for eight hours, craves companionship and stimulation. In accepting his dog's desire for a walk, he is able to postpone his immediate needs. By walking the dog instead of watching television, this boy has developed his emotional intelligence and his capacity for empathy.

- Empathy promotes “moral intelligence,” the capacity to understand right from wrong and the ability to act on that understanding. A morally intelligent person makes decisions that benefit not only herself but also others around her.¹³
- Empathy encourages “prosocial” behavior—behavior that has a positive social consequence.¹⁴
For example, Christopher is one of the more popular boys in his third-grade class. A new student, Roger, is transferred into the class mid-year from a school in another state. Roger is shy and small for his size. On his first day of school, when he is introduced to the classroom, some of the children begin to snicker and comment on his size. After the introduction, the teacher instructs the class to choose partners for a math exercise. Christopher, who is sitting in front of Roger, turns around and asks him if he would like to be his partner. Roger gratefully accepts and is eventually accepted by the class.



Empathy is an important emotional resource linked to many positive psychological traits.

What does empathy have to do with animals?



Ten-year-old children who had established strong bonds with their dog had significantly higher self-esteem, as well as greater empathy.

Children often experience a natural affinity for animals—one that researchers find begins in infancy. Children and animals can be a good mix. One study of three hundred boys and girls between the ages of three and thirteen found that 99.3 percent of them wanted pets—a clear indication of children’s overall positive attitude toward companion animals.¹⁵

This is why a growing variety of programs pair animals with children. Pet therapy animals interact with the children of domestic violence victims and children with special physical and emotional needs. At-risk youth learn how to train shelter dogs using positive rewards instead of punishment, creating more adoptable dogs. The animal enjoys a lively and caring companion; the youth enjoys an affectionate relationship and learns about responsibility, care, and reciprocity.

Research demonstrates very tangible benefits to children who form bonds with animals:

- Children who form a bond with their companion animal score higher on measures of social competence and empathy.¹⁶
- Children perceive their pets as special friends, important family members, and providers of social interactions, affection, and emotional support.¹⁷
- Children who had a pet during their childhood were more empathetic, more prone to enter a helping profession, and were more oriented toward social values than those without a pet.¹⁸
- Animals can facilitate social interaction between children: When an animal is present, children are more likely to interact with a disabled child.¹⁹
- Children who had increased empathy scores because of their relationship with their pets also showed greater empathy toward people.²⁰
- Ten-year-old children who had established strong bonds with their dog had significantly higher self-esteem, as well as greater empathy.²¹ When a dog was present in the classroom of first graders, they showed higher social integration and less aggression compared to children in a classroom without an animal.²²

Teaching empathy through the human-animal relationship

Parents can help their children by paying attention to how they interact with animals. Parents should both discourage unwanted conduct as well as promote positive behavior.

Recognize undesirable behavior

Children's mistreatment of animals often is a warning sign that they are developing aggressive behavioral tendencies. When should parents and teachers be concerned about their child's treatment of animals? Consider these factors:

- ✓ The age of the child and her understanding of the consequences of her actions.
A two-year-old who chases the family cat may not understand that she is frightening or annoying the animal.
- ✓ The child's reaction to the situation.
A ten-year-old boy is throwing stones at geese in a nearby pond. His father intervenes, pointing out that he is disturbing the animals and could hurt them. Is the child willing to correct his behavior? Does he express regret that he bothered the animal?
- ✓ The degree of injury.
When children frighten or disturb an animal, or cause minimal discomfort, the parent or teacher should step in. If an animal sustains an injury, the situation is very serious.
- ✓ Whether the behavior was planned or spontaneous.
It is less serious if a thirteen-year-old girl spontaneously decides in a moment of bad judgment to let her dog chase a neighbor's cat than if she planned to do it.
- ✓ The number of animals affected and whether the child repeated the behavior.
If the young girl whose dog chases a neighbor's cat also provoked her dog to chase squirrels and a number of other neighbor's cats, her actions would be considered more serious.



Parents should get involved if they see—or hear about—their child behaving inappropriately with an animal. What is inappropriate behavior? Below are some warning signs for parents.

The child:

- ▼ Handles animals roughly.
- ▼ Deliberately tries to frighten animals.
- ▼ Intentionally tries to injure animals.
- ▼ Treats animals like “objects” or “toys” rather than living creatures.
- ▼ Shows no interest or awareness of animals’ interests or needs.
- ▼ Exhibits other aggressive, or impulsive, tendencies.
- ▼ Does not respond to parental or other adult intervention regarding their treatment of animals.

Turn unwanted behavior into something positive

Intervene *whenever* your child mistreats an animal—whether in a minor way, such as chasing birds, or more seriously.

- + Stop the behavior firmly and gently.
- + Explain to the child that he or she is frightening, or hurting, the animal.
- + Ask the child to imagine how the animal feels being treated that way.
- + Ask the child if he or she knows what he or she was thinking or feeling before mistreating the animal.
- + Ask the child how he or she could have approached or handled the animal differently.
- + Try to end the intervention with a positive experience between the child and the animal, if possible.

The first step is to make sure no harm is done in the child-animal relationship. However, this is just the first step of many that can contribute to building a child’s capacity for empathy.



Try to end the intervention with a positive experience between the child and the animal, if possible.

Empathy building tips

Like any other skill—riding a bike, learning to write, or playing the piano—empathy can be developed. We are born with the potential to be empathetic. Experts on empathy agree that encouraging the expression of empathy requires four things:

1. Learning the cognitive skill of taking another being's perspective, or role.²³

For example, Frank is six years old. When his two-year-old sister was cranky after awakening from her nap, and the usual things did not cheer her up, he understood why she remained unhappy. Frank, his mother and father were drinking pink lemonade. Since they had run out of pink lemonade, Frank's mother offered his sister yellow lemonade, which she refused. Frank realized she wanted the pink lemonade, like everybody else, and he offered his sister his pink lemonade. She accepted it with a smile. Frank was able to put himself in his sister's place. Doing that enabled him to solve the problem of his sister's crankiness.

2. Being exposed to interactions and social experiences in which empathy is demonstrated.

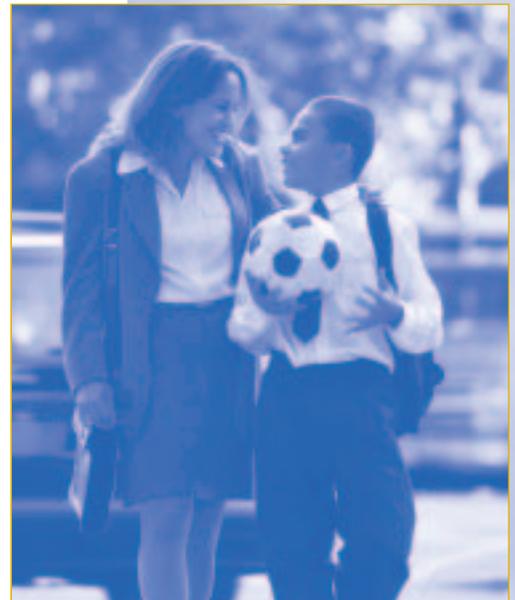
Children who see their parents, teachers, older siblings, and classmates being kind, and acting kindly toward them, are more likely to act that way themselves.²⁴

3. Having one's own emotional needs satisfied so that one can respond to another's.²⁵

4. Learning particular and practical skills.

Specialists also agree that children will not necessarily change their behavior simply because they were exposed to information or talked about an issue with their parents. *Children need to learn specific, concrete skills in order to change their behavior—whether that change is becoming less aggressive or making better interpersonal choices.*²⁶

The evidence is clear: Children exposed to empathy training score higher on measures of empathy and sociability than children without the skill training.²⁷



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The expression of empathy requires having one's emotional needs satisfied so that one can respond to another's.

All of the empathy building tips that follow address one or more of those points. For example, reading animal-friendly stories, and asking questions that build *perspective taking*, will help develop empathy. Perspective taking refers to the cognitive ability to place one's self in another's situation and to understand the other's feelings and reactions. How would it feel to be that animal? What do you imagine the animal is feeling? Would you like to be that animal? Why or why not?

Children can be exposed to empathy by participating in a family activity in which the purpose is to help another. For example, helping manage human-wildlife conflict can be a family project. Parents and children can research how to live peacefully with deer in their area—by selective planting, fencing, and other methods. Or a family can participate in a “GeesePeace” project, in which a community learns nonlethal tactics for living closely with large geese populations. Or a family can volunteer at a local humane society. Dogs and cats greatly appreciate the interaction and company that volunteers provide.

Reading aloud to a child *helps meet a child's emotional needs*. Especially for younger children, reading aloud with a parent provides the experience of a positive, close physical presence that can be reassuring and comforting. A parent sitting on a couch with his child next to him, his arm draped around the child's shoulder, reading a book together and speculating on what will happen next, builds a child's sense of security, which aids learning. Many parents and teachers today use the “time-out” method as a way to teach a child self-management skills. “Time-outs” are an effective nonpunitive technique that can be used to correct misbehavior. Just as important, though, are “time-ins.” Time-ins are moments when the parent and child interact in a positive way and in which the child experiences physical reassurance, such as a parent's stroking her hair or rubbing her back.²⁸



Parents and children can research how to live peacefully with deer in their area.

Four considerations for parents and teachers

1. Seize the Opportunity

Children interact with animals in their everyday lives and they witness human-animal interactions in a variety of ways—on television, in books, in computer games, in the neighborhood, and at home. Parents and teachers can take the opportunity to point out to children both negative and positive interactions. Ask the child to notice the behavior, what he thinks of it, and how he thinks the animal might be feeling.

For example, many cartoons feature animals being shot from cannons, flattened by motor vehicles, or caught in some physically precarious position. Typically, the cartoon animal miraculously survives this treatment, although they may look a little the worse for wear.

If your child is viewing such a cartoon, ask him what he thinks would happen in real life if the animal had the same experience. Explore why they show animals in this way in cartoons. What makes it funny? How would he make sure that other children don't think it's okay to treat animals this way?

2. Make It Positive

While it is important to correct a child's behavior, always try to end an intervention on a positive note. If a child is handling an animal too roughly, tell the child that this kind of interaction is inappropriate, and why. Explain what it feels like to be the animal. Then help the child have a positive interaction with the animal—patting the dog slowly and gently; observing how the geese move and swim, rather than chasing them; picking the cat up in a way that protects the cat and makes her feel safe.

What would you do in this situation? You are a parent who occasionally volunteers in your son's second-grade classroom. A classroom rabbit lives in the classroom during the day and with the teacher in the evenings and weekends. When the teacher is distracted, you notice two girls who seem to deliberately tease the rabbit—poking pencils into his crate and flicking their fingers against the crate so that the crate rattles. Would you ignore the behavior until you saw it repeated? Would you talk to the two girls? What would you say? Or would you talk to the teacher?



3. Make It Interesting

Children are naturally fascinated with animals—just like adults! Use that natural inclination to teach them perspective taking, one of the first steps to learning empathy.

For example, play the “Who Am I?” game. Have members of the family identify a particular animal they know or have heard about. Younger children will need assistance from an older sibling or a parent. For instance, an eight-year-old girl chooses a neighbor’s dog. Other family members try to identify the animal she is thinking about by asking questions that can only be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Are you alive now? Do you have four legs? Do you weigh more than fifty pounds? Do I know you personally? If the family cannot guess the animal’s identity in twenty questions, the player wins a prize—perhaps the right to choose the next family video, to play a computer game, or to choose what to eat for dinner.

Another game works during family car trips. Each player identifies an animal she or he observes and then takes on the role of that animal—the cow in the field, the dog on the leash, the bird singing in the tree. Ask them to describe what it is like to be that animal. What are they thinking? Feeling? What would they like to do? If they could talk, what would they say and to whom? What is their favorite activity? Why? What are they most afraid of? What makes them the happiest?

4. Set an Example

Children tend to mimic the actions of parents and teachers, not what they say. As a parent, teacher, or caring adult, you are the most important lesson for your child. How you treat others, and the child, will be more critical than anything else you do or say.

The research is clear: parents who act empathetically are more likely to have children who are empathetic. And teachers who model the desired behaviors have students who are more likely to adopt these behaviors.²⁹

Perform an “empathy check”:

- ✓ Observe your interactions with other family members. Do you pay attention to their feelings and take them into account? Do you sometimes try to walk in their shoes to see what it may feel like to be them?
- ✓ Can you think of one example in the last week when someone was kind to you? Do you remember how you felt or how you responded?
- ✓ Have you taken the time to enjoy a tender moment with your child in which he felt physical closeness and comfort? If you have companion animals in the home, have you taken time to interact with them?
- ✓ Think of three ways in the next week you can show your child what it means to be empathetic. For example,

you may initiate a family project to volunteer at a humane society, offer to walk an elderly neighbor’s dog or feed her cat, or help out with low-cost spay/neuter programs in your area. You also might review family activities with an “empathy lens” that takes into account what effect the activity has on the animals involved (petting farms, circuses, etc.). Have a family discussion, using empathy for the animals to decide the best course of action.

- ✓ Study famous people known for being empathetic: Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and Jane Goodall. What made this person empathetic? How did they become who they were? What hardships did they have to overcome? If you could ask them one question, what would it be?

Teaching the language of emotion

Parents and teachers who encourage children to discuss their feelings and problems help children develop their capacity for empathy. Teaching the language of emotion develops emotional intelligence. Intelligence is not just something a child is born with. All types of intelligence—cognitive, social, moral, emotional—respond to education. While heredity plays a part, intelligence grows through learning skills, practicing those skills, seeing those skills modeled by others, and by being rewarded for exhibiting the skills.³⁰

Understanding our feelings is important for a number of reasons. They can help us make decisions or interfere with our ability to function. They can explain something to us or they can make something more difficult to understand.

Here's an example: Sara's parents noticed that recently she had started delaying going to bed. They reminded her about their bedtime rules and that they existed for a good reason. When they asked her what she thought the problem was, Sara didn't know at first. "Close your eyes and imagine that it is time to go to bed," her dad said. "Picture yourself walking to the bedroom. What are you feeling? What are you imagining?" With this help from her dad, Sara said she felt scared. "What's there to be afraid of?" he asked. "Mommy and I are here with you." Then Sara realized: "I'm afraid Mommy won't come back when she goes to her night job." Directly discussing Sara's fear, Dad and Mom reassured her and Sara was able to fall asleep again. In this process, Sara learned how to identify a feeling. We do not always know we are scared. Sometimes we are too scared to know we are scared—instead we might act angry, or grouchy, or oppositional.

The first step in learning the language of emotion is to identify a feeling and name it.³¹ This is not always as easy as it seems. Here are some helpful hints to teach your child the language of emotion.

- ✓ Use an "emotional wheel" to teach your child the names of feelings. During a peaceful moment, show them the wheel and ask them about one or two of the feelings. Do they remember a time when they felt sad? Why? How about feeling frustrated? Do they know what it means to feel concerned?
- ✓ After your child has learned some of the names for feelings, use the wheel to help them identify and name a feeling at the time it is occurring. For example, perhaps you notice your child becoming frustrated as he tries to put a toy together. Have him describe what he's feeling by selecting a feeling from the emotional wheel. If he is a young child, you may have to guide him, or offer him choices. Affirm his ability to identify his feeling and remind him that naming a feeling is the first step. The next step you will work on together is how to make choices about what to do based on knowing what his feeling is.



Encouraging children to discuss their feelings and problems helps them develop their capacity for empathy.

Specific steps to empathy

Children—and adults—of all ages can benefit from empathy training. Here are the basic components:

Present the idea of empathy.

Tell children what it is, describe how it develops, and give examples. Explain why empathy is important: they, and those around them, will be more effective and happy. Once they understand the behavior of empathy, and the word to describe that behavior, they have a word to mentally classify various behaviors and attitudes. This gives children the cognitive labels they need to hold onto an idea and then to apply that idea in new situations.

Concentrate initially on the child's feelings.

Experts agree that children who learn “the language of emotion” are better equipped to handle academic, social, and emotional challenges.

Focus on the similarities between the child and others.

Researchers have found that empathy for others is enhanced if the teaching strategy focuses on similarities first and only later calls attention to differences.³²

When looking at similarities between the child and others, make sure to include animals! Focusing on similarities helps the child move from a perspective centered on the self to one where he or she is able to recognize and “take in” an ever-widening range of perspectives. This is a normal developmental process, but one that needs to be encouraged. What we have called “perspective taking”—being able to put yourself into someone else’s position and to experience what they are thinking and feeling—benefits a child’s cognitive development as well as emotional development. It also provides them with skills to more successfully respond to a variety of social and interpersonal situations.

Many young girls express a fascination with horses, for instance. Information about horses can be obtained from the library and the Internet. One useful exercise would be to identify all of the characteristics horses and people share: being a mammal, experiencing emotions, family relationships, the use of senses. Although there are obvious differences between horses and humans, this exercise would focus solely on the similarities.



When looking at similarities between the child and others, make sure to include animals!

Role play to put what has been learned in empathy training to the test.

One researcher noted that empathy is related to critical thinking and imagination.³³ She goes on to note that role-taking, the key feature of empathy building, promotes the kinds of mental habits associated with astute thinking: open-mindedness, novel approaches to problems, cognitive and personal flexibility, and persistent inquiring.

Here is a good example of role taking: The classmates of Sharon, a twelve-year-old, selected her to be the leader of their group project. Sharon was quite pleased to be selected as the group leader, because she was a new student at that school and was just beginning to get to know her classmates. The group decided to investigate the lives of chimpanzees—where they originate, what we know about their intelligence and social lives, and how well they are doing as a species. Is their survival being threatened or are they thriving? In the course of their investigation, the group discovered that there was a controversy around chimpanzees being used in entertainment, e.g., using chimpanzees as actors in movies, television shows, and commercials. Some members of the group did not think this was important. They thought the group should just study chimpanzees in their natural habitat. Sharon suggests that all aspects of chimpanzee's lives should be examined.



Select someone to play the role of Sharon. Choose two or three other children to play the roles of her friends. Give them the overview of the dilemma and ask them to take on the roles. Offer to coach their performance so that key factors are covered: paying attention to one's own sensitivities, being able to communicate how one is feeling, listening to others' ideas while at the same time maintaining one's own perspective, handling peer pressure and need for acceptance. Coach the children on a solution to the group conflict, such as forming a subgroup that examines the problem of chimpanzees in entertainment.

Encourage cooperation.

All skills, whether they are social, cognitive, or emotional, need to be learned, and parents and teachers can set up situations where that can happen.

In the classroom, use the jigsaw technique, a group learning exercise in which each student must cooperate with his or her classmates to achieve individual goals.³⁴

STEP 1: Divide students into five- or six-person jigsaw groups. Make the groups as diverse as possible.

STEP 2: Appoint one student from each group as the leader. Initially, this person should be the most mature student in the group.



All skills, whether they are social, cognitive, or emotional, need to be learned.

STEP 3: Divide a lesson into five or six segments. If you want the students to learn about the problem of homeless animals, you might divide the problem into the following segments:

What is the extent of the problem? (national and state statistics for number of animals, how state and local agencies handle the problem, etc.)

What's involved with spay/neuter programs and adoption? (How does it get done? What resources are available? Does it work? What are the alternatives?)

What are "no kill" shelters? (When did they begin? Why did they begin? How many are there? Are they doing any good?)

What is the role of breeders and pet stores in the problem of homeless animals? (Are they part of the problem or part of the solution? Why or why not?)

Identify and describe a model program that addresses the problem of homeless animals. (What makes it a model? What is the evidence for its success? How can other communities duplicate it?)

STEP 4: Assign each student to learn one segment. Make sure students only have access to their segment.

STEP 5: Give students time to read over their segment. They do not have to memorize it.

STEP 6: Form temporary "expert" groups by having one student from each jigsaw group join other students assigned to the same segment. Give students in these expert groups time to discuss and research the main points of their segment and then to rehearse the presentations they will make to their jigsaw group.

STEP 7: Bring the students back into their original jigsaw groups.

STEP 8: Have each student present his or her segment to the group. Encourage others in the group to ask questions for clarification.

STEP 9: Circulate among the groups and offer coaching when necessary.

STEP 10: At the end of the session, give a quiz on the material so that students understand the importance of paying attention to others and cooperating.

Provide exposure to emotionally arousing situations.

One way children learn empathy is by being exposed to emotional events or situations in which they witness an animal or person in distress or need. Of course, it is important to be sure that the nature of the scene is suitable for the age of the child. Material that is too graphic, or presented to a child too young to process it, can clearly be detrimental. However, if thoughtfully done, triggering emotions amplifies the acquisition of empathy.

Some examples: Study the plight of a farmed animal that has escaped a truck on the way to a slaughterhouse. Or visit a wildlife rehabilitation center and learn about the various ways in which wild animals are injured, either deliberately or accidentally. Or research a local animal cruelty case. Talk about what happened to the animal. Who was the abuser? What should happen to the abuser?



Learn to think, “I am a good person.”

It is important for a child to have the skills to show empathy—to express caring attitudes, to behave with sensitivity and kindness, and to be able to care about others. Just as important is that the child thinks of himself or herself as a “good person.” Children who think well of themselves are much more likely to respond empathetically and to in their ability to care and act responsibly.³⁵

Michael, a 9-year-old boy, noticed his cat trying to get at a baby rabbit near his home in the country. He intervened by waving his cat away, looked around, but did not see a mother rabbit nearby. He gently picked up the baby rabbit and took it to his mother. Together, they called the local Humane Society to determine how best to care for the rabbit. Michael’s mother congratulated him on his thoughtfulness, saying, “I think you are a good person for noticing the baby rabbit and making sure you did something to help him.”

Children who think of themselves as good people are more likely to become just that—good children and good adults. Positive self-images lead to lasting behavior and values that do not depend on another person’s presence.

Practice!

The most talented basketball players, pianists, golfers, and writers all have one thing in common: they practice, practice, practice.

We know that empathy is a skill that can be learned. It requires cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, the development of certain ideas about self (I am good) and others (they are like me), and the capacity to act. Like any other skill, it requires practice on a continuous, lifelong basis.

Some children, particularly younger ones, may not find it easy to imagine being an animal or other person. Perhaps the child has not received many empathetic responses. Perhaps they are still too young to grasp the concept. This makes it all the more important for parents to be continuously alert to ways of building empathy in their children and for teachers to keep in mind both formal and informal ways to teach, and demonstrate, empathy.

Employ closing exercises.

After teaching an empathy lesson, if possible, reinforce what was learned by having the children participate in an activity that gives closure to the experience. For example, they may want to draw a picture, write a story, make a collage, or keep a diary about their experience. Children who have access to and interest in computers can make a slide show. Offer suggestions to children about closing activities and invite them to create their own. Encourage activities that may be used to communicate what they have learned to others.



We believe empathy is clearly a “basic skill” that every child deserves, and needs, to learn.

The last word

We believe empathy is clearly a “basic skill” that every child deserves, and needs, to learn. All of us can benefit from thinking more about empathy—what it means, and how to develop and nurture it. (Another benefit of teaching empathy is that it helps the teacher remember important lessons, too!)

We hope that you will discover that learning about—and teaching—empathy can be very rewarding. Equipping your child with empathy is one of the most important things you can do for her or him. You will have vastly increased your child’s chances of academic and interpersonal success. Your child benefits, as do your child’s family, friends, and community.

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